

THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

When You Pray, Say...Give Us Today Our Daily Bread

March 22, 1998
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Give us this day our daily bread...

When we pray for bread as a means of practicing the wholeness which is appropriate to the kingdom, we covenant to help prepare and serve up that which God, after all, gives to us not for hoarding but for use.... But bread has not just to do with the question of survival. It is also the offering of hospitality and love. It is what we serve our guests in moments of joy when we want to celebrate together the wholeness of life. The whole of life, the cost and suffering as well as the reward and comfort, are gathered and ground together, baked, served and consumed in the act of sharing bread.

David Willis
Daring Prayer

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

WHEN YOU PRAY, SAY.... GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD

Exodus 16:1-12
Matthew 15:32-39

"I am going to rain bread from heaven for you."
Exodus 16:4

God of mercy and love, we bring all our needs to you in confidence that you love us and that you use our awareness of our needs to feed us and give us gifts for our strength and sustenance. And so we ask for insight and understanding and a sense of your presence not just here in this place, but in our world, our relationships, our jobs, our hopes and dreams. Startle us with your truth and open our hearts and minds to your word, in Jesus Christ. Amen.

* * *

The smell of bread baking is one of God's delectable gifts. In the neighborhood where I grew up, directly across the street from the playground and behind a fire station, there was a bakery from which emanated, all day long, the most amazing smells. In the early morning a fleet of green trucks took on their daily load of bread, to be delivered to homes on a route each driver knew and plied. And then coffee cakes, followed by cookies: molasses, sugar and oatmeal, big as saucers, twelve to a plastic bag. In the days before OSHA, three 12 year-old boys were hired to bag the cookies, all morning for 25¢ an hour and the open invitation to eat all you wanted. It was my first paying job and, all things considered, with the exception of being the pastor of this church, my favorite.

The smell of that bakery, of bread baking on an early summer morning, remains with me as a blessing, a benediction which fell gently over all of life, a promise somehow that God is in heaven and all will be well.

I love the very idea of bread baking. I've even tried my hand at it a few times – enough to discover that it is a labor intensive activity requiring more time and patience than I usually have.

My children, knowing all of this, purchased for a birthday once a marvelous machine that allows me to enjoy the aesthetics of the experience without the time, patience or much effort, for that matter. I can simply dump in flour, milk, sugar, salt, cinnamon and raisins, orange zest if I'm feeling really brave, add a little yeast, plug it in, push a button, and it mixes, kneads, knows how long to allow the bread to rise, bakes it and makes an electronic beep to tell me that it is done. And, best of all, the aroma – The Fairview Bakery in my own kitchen.

I am not alone, obviously. Real estate sales people know the persuasive power of the aroma of something in the kitchen baking: bread is almost irresistible. And it is, of course, a metaphor

with many meanings: slang for money: “I need some bread” ... “How much bread do you have?” And love – on a thousand Hallmark Cards: “A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou.” And hospitality: bread shared – bread served to guests at table, first, as a symbol of the meal to come, symbol of hospitality. Bread of life: bread as metaphor for life’s basic necessities: for what the maintenance of human life requires: for the social, spiritual substance of humanness: bread as sacrament – the body of Christ for you and me: bread as promise that all of life is sacramental: that the things of this world, the material, solid, stuff of reality is God’s creation and contains within it the mystery and reality of God.

And so when his disciples asked him to teach them to pray one day, he said:

“When you pray, say:
Father, hallowed be your name
your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread ...” [Luke 11:2-3]

Jesus begins his lesson on prayer by inviting his friends to use a term of endearment, an intimate name for God. It is a bold, radical suggestion, that the God who is so holy and righteous that there is no name for God that is pronounced out loud, that God may be addressed in terms of our first and most intimate relationships – our parents: our mother, our father.

And that this intimate God, who comes close, who knows us and loves us as a father loves his children, as a mother comforts and nurses and cradles her infant, that this God is also the transcendent, holy Other, mysterious, beyond our ability to comprehend, regardless of the sophistication, or orthodoxy, or political correctness of our theology.

“Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.” Your reign, O God, is already here and we who pray this prayer intend to be part of it, intend not to miss the beauty and passion and justice and kindness and blessedness of the times and places and relationships where God is ruler and Jesus Christ is Lord.

And then bread: our hunger, our most basic bodily needs. It’s quite a leap from the sublime contours of a theology of immanence and transcendence to “what’s for dinner?” And the sense of it is that Jesus makes this leap deliberately, brings bread and human need and hunger into this prayer for a very important purpose.

From the beginning people have tried to make Christianity into an other-worldly religion. The subdivision of reality into two realms – material and spiritual, is as old as the religion of ancient Babylon. Once you buy into that, it isn’t long until the physical is being described as dirty, impure, sinful...and the spiritual as pure, clean and good. Once you buy into that division, religion is for the purpose of keeping our attention on the spiritual and not the physical: to discipline us, to resist the allure and beauty of the physical in order to dwell, sublimely detached from material reality, unaffected by human hunger and need. John the Baptist and others like him in Jesus’ day lived in the realm of the spirit like that; denying physical needs, eating only what they could forage in the desert, wearing rough clothes, sleeping between rocks in the

wilderness. People wondered why Jesus, claiming the presence of God's kingdom, did not teach that and live that way. Jesus suffered by comparison with John's radical zealotry, John's clear other-worldliness. "John came neither eating or drinking...the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard.'" [Matthew 11:19] They couldn't understand how a man of God seemed to have such a good time eating and drinking with his friends, obviously enjoying the things of the physical, tangible, sensual world.

Greek philosophy, with which Christianity would contend for centuries, taught the same lesson: the division between physical and spiritual: world and otherworld, earth and heaven. But Jesus intentionally erased that distinction both in the way he lived and by teaching his friends to pray for daily bread.

W. H. Auden caught the spirit of Jesus' holistic theology in a delightful poem, *No, Plato, No*:

I can't imagine anything
that I would less like to be
than a disincarnate Spirit,
unable to chew or sip
or make contact with surfaces
or breathe the scents of summer
or comprehend speech or music
or gaze at what lies beyond.
No, God placed me exactly
where I'd have chosen to be:
the sub-lunar world is such fun,
where man is male or female
and gives Proper Names to all things.

[W. H. Auden, *Thank You, Fog*, cited by Larry Rasmussen, *Luther and a Gospel of Earth*, in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 51, 1997]

Bread symbolizes the wholeness and unity of our humanness. We are not disembodied spirits but, at our best, physical and spiritual, invited by God to experience and to enjoy the goodness of creation. It is, in fact, heresy to conclude that God made a mistake by creating us with physical bodies and physical appetites. The creation is God's idea. Hunger is God's idea. So is good food and wine. So is sex and laughter and visual beauty and great music. Helmut Thielicke was one of the great preachers of the last generation. I have been referring to a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer he preached to his congregation in Stuttgart in the terrible final days of World War II. As the bombs destroyed their city, their church, their homes, their livelihood, their sources of food and hope, he told them to pray for bread: that even Beethoven sounds lousy when you are hungry and that if they had to choose either a volume of poems or a wool sweater to take to the air-raid shelter, they should go with the sweater.

Creation is good, Jesus was teaching. Evil is not the physical, the sensual; it is whatever violates the goodness of the creation. The physical world and the human senses which allow us to

experience and enjoy it are not suspect. Hunger, need, desire, joy...are gifts, means of grace. God is in them. "Give us each day our daily bread."

One time Jesus did just that. A crowd had been following him to hear his teaching. The day was coming to an end. People were hungry. There was no place to get food. Someone volunteered two fish and five loaves. And somehow that modest investment, in his hands, became enough food to satisfy everyone.

On that occasion he prayed one of the most familiar and ancient prayers of his people:

"Blessed are Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the earth, who bringest forth bread from the earth."

No Jew ever prayed, or prays, those words without remembering the precious story of God's people in the wilderness and their hunger and how God provided manna for them to eat. Slaves in Egypt for several generations, led out of slavery by Moses, they are barely across the Sea of Reeds and into the wilderness on the far side when they start to complain. "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread: for you have brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." [Exodus 16:3] Slavery may have been awful, but at least there was food and shelter.

The wilderness is where God's people learn how dependent they have become on their physical security and comfort: how they are slaves to something more powerful and insidious than the Egyptians.

Studs Terkel wrote a book, *American Dreams: Lost and Found*, and interviewed a cross-section of people about their definition of "the American Dream." A successful businessman said:

"The American Dream is to be better off than we are. How much money is 'enough money?' 'Enough money' is always a little bit more than you have. There's never enough of anything. This is why people go on. You always go for the brass ring that's always out there a hundred yards farther. It's like a mirage in the desert: it always stays about a hundred yards ahead of you. You must go for more – for faster, better. If you're not getting better and faster, you're getting worse."

Jesus was no ascetic, but it was daily bread that he taught them to pray for: the sustenance I need today, the immediate resources I need to get to tomorrow.

Marian Wright Edelman, in her wonderful little book, *The Meaning of Success – a Letter to My Children and Yours*, writes:

"Don't get overwhelmed. Sometimes when I get frantic about all I have to do and spin my wheels, I try to recall Carlyle's advice: 'Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand.' Try to take each

day and each task as they come, breaking them down into manageable pieces for action while struggling to see the whole.”

Marian Wright Edelman then quotes something the great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said – I think one of the wisest things anyone ever said:

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love.” [*The Irony of American History*]

“Give us each day our daily bread.”

The wilderness is where we learn how dependent we have become. It is also the place where we learn that God will provide for our most basic needs, where we receive the promise, “I will rain bread from heaven for you.”

Sometimes life takes an unexpected turn and we find ourselves no longer in charge, no longer as independent and self reliant and autonomous as we assumed we were, no longer sure we have the resources for a new and strange and frightening future. Sometimes life teaches us a lesson in our dependence on others and on God for basic resources. It can happen with unexpected change: in a job, a relationship, our health....

Let me tell you about two friends, Jim and Betsy York. They live in Boca Raton, Florida and I met them some time ago. They are very devoted Presbyterians. Jim is an orthopedic surgeon who has taken time away from his busy practice over the years to be a volunteer with the Presbyterian Church medical mission in Africa. They’ve done it 15 or 20 times. For several weeks, sometimes several months, Jim and Betsy pack, close their home, say goodbye to their friends and go to the Cameroon or Zaire or Sudan and work in Presbyterian hospitals, performing surgery in situations very different from the modern operating theaters where Jim is accustomed to fixing shoulders and replacing knees and hips. They are absolutely delightful people; lively, energetic, gracious. Jim is trim and athletic, loves to golf; a big, strong man, with a strong grip – he’s in great shape. They have begun retirement – which for them means more time to go to Africa and practice medicine.

Jim was in Chicago to have a knee replacement himself recently, because he has family here. And during the surgery, which he has performed hundreds of times, something unplanned happened during the administration of the anesthesia, a tiny slip. Jim York woke up to find himself paralyzed from the waist down.

Because of their relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) we got a call about them and pastors began to visit them in the hospital and then in rehabilitation. Last Saturday they flew back to Florida, Jim strapped in his wheelchair.

The day before they left we talked at length. This active, strapping man was devastated initially. But now he's angry – not at God – but that he can't go to Africa next month. "I'm going" he said "even if I have to operate out of this contraption." Betsy said, "We've prayed a lot these past few weeks. We can't believe God did this. But what we do believe is that God is going to get us out of it somehow, or make something out of it, or give us what we need to make something out of it." Jim brightened up. It's already happening. "The Senior Highs in our church have already invited me to come meet with them and talk about how we're coping and how we're going to deal with this adversity." And he explained that his pastor had told them that they had already removed part of a pew so Jim could sit in his favorite spot in the sanctuary next Sunday.

"We're just going to have to learn to depend a little more on God," Jim York said.

It was the great thinker Karl Barth whose sharp insight into human nature led him to conclude that our real problem with asking God for anything isn't really that we don't believe God can and will respond, not really that there are some things for which we have no business asking God, or anyone else, for that matter. The real problem, Barth said, is we don't like to have to ask God for anything. We don't like the implied dependence. We prefer to believe that we can provide for ourselves.

And there comes a day, as it has come to Jim York, when we learn that our resources are all gone: that we've reached deeply into our own souls and there's nothing left there, that we have spent out all we have – physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually – our hands are empty and the one thing left for us is to acknowledge the truth and to throw ourselves on the mercy and providence of God and to say,

"Give us this day our daily bread."

So the invitation is to pray confidently and to bring before God your most basic, most urgent needs: your desires, your hunger, your hopes and dreams, your disappointments and frustrations, your anxiety and your anger: all of it: all of what is most human about you. Leave nothing out. Pray boldly, simply, honestly.

"I will rain bread from heaven for you."

The promise is that God hears your prayer and will give you, not always what you want, or think you want, but what you need today.

"Give us each day, our daily bread."

Amen.